

**BM74 - BLED****2018 INTRODUCTION TO ESU'S POLICIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (amended)****1. What is higher education?**

Education has become a core institution of our society and one of the main pillars of modern civilization. It plays a central role in social and economic development, democratic empowerment and the advancement of the general well-being of societies.

Higher education is and has always been a human institution for advancing and passing on cultural and intellectual heritage and is a human right guaranteed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It is a public good, public responsibility, and therefore should be publicly steered and supported and not become a subject to economic speculation and prey to the ideologies of privatisation and the shrinking of the state.

Higher education is a general interest of all people, as it contributes to the common good by increasing the general level of education in society. Taking into account the diversity of the population and different needs of the individuals, higher education must be able to serve different needs and targets at the same time. It is of utmost importance that the multifunctional idea of higher education is implemented, strengthened and focused on by those responsible for policymaking.

Higher Education should not be directed towards short-term goals of the labour market, but should create a chance for acquiring competence and understanding, as well as democratic values and skills, and language competences that are needed in the globalised world and the key for sustainable development of a society where everyone can live together peacefully. Solidarity, responsibility, diversity and cooperation should be the main concerns in the development of higher education institutions, shaping the multicultural future we will be living in. This can be seen as part of the long-term transformation of higher education away from a tool for the elite towards a tool for the whole of society and all individuals.

**2. Who is higher education for?**

Higher education is an inalienable and fundamental human right. As such it must be open for all parts of the society, independent from background, age or any other factor. Access must be free, not only economically free but also free in terms of without barriers. Access should not be considered solely as admission to higher education, but more holistic as the means,

structures and mechanisms by which students are supported during their studies. It also includes the possibility to acquire the necessary tools to succeed when leaving higher education.

Educational systems must be designed in such a way that the choices made during primary and secondary education do not hinder access to higher education. Educational systems' built-in mechanisms maintaining socioeconomic divides must be identified and tackled accordingly. Ways of enabling wider access to higher education to marginalised groups must be implemented, in order to create an inclusive environment mirroring society and all its diversity.

### **3. Interaction within the community**

Higher education is neither a separate entity nor does it have its own sphere of reality separate from the rest of society. It is an important part of society, although its role is too often ignored or misunderstood. Higher education plays a crucial role for the development of the society as a whole and for the growth of the local communities that each Institution belongs to.

Higher education provides society with a fundamental basis, which allows for constant social development and improvement in living standards of the whole community.

Higher education has multiple purposes; it ensures the existence and the well-being of democratic principles, such as critical thinking, active participation, active citizenship, freedom of speech and freedom of thought. In this sense, Higher Education works not only for those who are enrolled in it, but also for the rest of community, especially through the continuous creation of knowledge and the ability to address the challenges faced by the local communities. This is linked to the role of research, done by Higher Education Institutions, which also needs to be free, accessible for everyone and needs to get more funds, to ensure its autonomy and availability. Conducting research and publishing scientific results also fulfils academia's duty to serve the community with knowledge and technology.

Therefore, all outcomes of scientific activities should be considered at least as partially owned by the community, and the availability of these outcomes should be free.

There is an obligation for all members of the higher education community to work as a community, with each other's needs and best interests at heart. This demands innovation and excellence in the process of teaching and learning, administration, staff-student relations, quality assurance and both institutional and student self-governance.

### **4. What is the outcome?**

The goal of higher education should be to provide the potential for as many different outcomes and outcome combinations as possible. As education is a lifelong process, it is vital that these outcomes are accessible at all times. The pace of change in the course of just the last decades makes a very clear illustration that not only it is impossible, but even more so inadvisable to attempt to predict what skills, competencies and knowledge will be needed in the future.

The key capacity for participants in higher education that must be provided is the capacity to think critically. Knowledge is a value in itself, and the capacity to effectively and usefully analyse and evaluate information, while also developing a satisfactory way of life, is the key to this. To ensure this, the process of teaching and learning must be student-centred. Higher Education does not have the task to prepare for a single profession; in fact, higher education needs to educate students with the competences to adapt to different professions and

working environments. This could be seen as the employability component of higher education.

Knowledge and the preparation for employment are just two out of many outcomes that can be delivered by higher education. Higher education has the potential to dramatically improve life quality for both the participant and for all of society – social and financial status, improvement in general health conditions, acknowledgement of and attempts to tear down inequalities. These skills are necessary for democratic and sustainable development and participation, and a society where these competences exist among more of the population is more likely to be able to handle the challenges posed by an increasingly globalised, multicultural and ecologically fragile world. In short, higher education equips people with tools to make more informed choices.

## **5. Who is affected?**

Everyone is affected. In times of economic hardship, the popular debate tends to focus entirely on student employment and the economy. However, the effects of higher education are wide reaching and not only to those who have the opportunity to study. Higher education should enable critical thinking and self-reflection and not only be about learning pre-determined skills. Individual and collective advantages of education are therefore closely linked. Education should not only enable individuals to take their living conditions in their own hands but also to collectively work for a better future of the society. Higher education is of general interest of all people, as it contributes to the common good by increasing the general level of education, societal development, democracy and well-being.

A public higher education system also affects society in a much broader way than a privatised system. The benefits to society of a highly educated population, outside of purely education-specific metrics vary from keeping down the costs of health care and public school systems to much higher levels of social trust. Social trust is paramount if a society is to build up functioning support systems and keep corruption as well as crime down.

Perhaps the most challenging to measure, but most valuable effect of higher education is the proliferation of harnessed creativity. A graduate who has the capacity to react to and develop their own innate creativity feeds into a global pattern of unprecedented advances and innovations. This benefits everybody, not solely employers, NGOs or political systems, but rather in increasing equality, developing healthcare, devising and improving on new technologies, exploring and understanding our lives and our universe, extending and improving human life, educating future generations to embrace and excel to their own potential and advancing the fundamental goal of human equality.

## **6. Who is responsible?**

Higher education is a public responsibility. The greatest benefit of a multi-functional higher education system accrues to the society overall. Therefore, a huge part of the responsibility is going back to the society. This responsibility consists of two parts. On the one hand, it includes challenging higher education and addressing clear needs towards higher education. On the other hand, the overall society is the fundamental funding source of higher education to a sustainable level, which should not impact on admissions or accessibility within the sector, or equality of participation. Although other groups are responsible towards higher education, these others are not related to the funding.

As the European Students' Union defines education as a right, access to education at any level should be ensured by the overall society through their taxation systems and governments. Important sub-groups which are responsible for design, the developing processes and

sustaining higher education are all people directly involved in higher education: students, researchers, teachers, institutional leadership, academic and non-academic staff. Effective quality assurance and efficient governance and financing of higher education are inseparable. Higher education needs constant development and the groups inside higher education must ensure that this occurs. But it should not be from the inside out or the outside in; it is essential that both directions are taking place at the same time. Another group or sub-group is employers in both the public and private sector, not in a sense that this group should have influence on curricula or should be directly involved in the decision making process, but rather an exchange of ideas and a dialogue between higher education and this group is needed in higher education.

## **European governing structures**

### **I. The European Union**

#### **1. Introduction**

In the past years, European integration has increasingly proceeded with more discussions on the European level and more competences being transferred to the EU or shared between the EU and its member states. The process of redefining basic values and principles in governance needs extensive discussions and strong involvement of affected stakeholders, especially students and higher education institutions. These processes increasingly involve the field of education: not only is higher education subject of numerous conferences, papers and communications, it is also affected by other agreements and regulations.

This includes for example the EU2020 strategy, more specifically the Modernisation Agenda, as well as austerity measures imposed by the European Union on countries in crisis. The purpose of this part of the paper is to outline the European students' approach towards these far-reaching changes on the EU level as well as the developments we wish to see in the approach to policies and structures of the European Union.

The European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on the 17th of November 2017, is a positive example of unanimous support by the European institutions to education, the role it can play in strengthening society and its importance towards making more inclusive and just European societies. On the other hand, the austerity measures imposed by the European Union on countries in crisis have affected education badly, not only by causing the lack of funding for it but also enforcing a general disaffection to the topic of education, making it seem unnecessary in times of crisis when it is actually the best tool to overcome it. This brought also to the impossibility to fulfil the EU2020 strategy in regards to education, which makes even more complicated to understand the ambition to establish a European Education Area by 2025: although some of the principles it should promote are in line on papers with the students' needs, many critical aspects are still unclear and potentially harming. In the recent years we witnessed an increased interest of the EU in higher education policies, the Skills Agenda, renews agenda for HE the ESU sees the necessity of keeping a critical eye on the recent developments, always being able to support, engage with and even promote from the beginning what's in the best interest of students, and to dispute and challenge with equal strength what goes against our values, ensuring that higher education is not seen just as an economic instrument for competitiveness, but that all its multiple purposes are acknowledged and equally promoted.

#### **2. Concentration of power within European institutions**

ESU supports transparent, democratic and academically free conditions in the EU. Educational policy should remain a national competence with legitimate support from the European Union through consultation with all affected stakeholders, especially students, teachers and institutional staff, and higher education institutions.

The EU, especially through its partnerships, trade agreements and neighbourhood policies affect the higher education systems of many countries outside its borders. Therefore, when touching upon higher education, these policies should reflect commitments made by countries within the Bologna process and partnership countries.

ESU believes that the EU should be a tool to enhance development and cooperation in Europe and not direct its higher education policies towards expanding its competencies within the field. Therefore, the EU should focus on supporting the countries and their multi-lateral commitments, by financing initiatives and incentivising investments in higher education. ESU firmly believes that the EU should reflect the interests of the countries and the academic community throughout its policies. These policies should not contradict other European agreements or structures; the EU should support the Bologna process and not create alternative structures when it disagrees with the countries of the Bologna process. Policies should also be in line with each other throughout the EU. There should be more cooperation between the DG Education and Culture, DG Research and Innovation and DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion at the European Commission as well as the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) at the European Parliament, without compromising the national competence in the field of education.

### **3. Economic and social perspectives**

ESU believes that the European Commission should have a supportive role in the processes concerning higher education and not a prescriptive role towards the member states, and should not put any undue pressure on the member states.

Clear and open discussions on the diversity of higher education systems are a requirement in order to mutualise the benefits of this diversity. These talks must include representatives of all stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Higher education must never merely be used as a tool for economic goals. The EU must accept that education's broadest primary purpose is for the development of societies, and reflect this in all legislative actions that have an impact on education systems. It is of utmost importance that the Europe 2025 Strategy and the European Education Area are not used for the further commodification of higher education in Europe and the EU should not approach education policy solely from the perspective of growth and jobs in the EU economy.

Higher education plays a primary role in preserving the existence of diversity in unity, as its connection with the local communities it operates within helps preserving local identities in a context that also encourages them to encounter each other; in fact, giving the different local identities the space to exist, acknowledge and preserve their history and language, gives them the dignity and the strength to cooperate with other ones, understanding and respecting similarities and differences.

Education is not a service that can be bought and sold between countries. Education should never be included in international trade agreements. Higher education institutions should not be considered companies for the purposes of EU legislation dealing with the freedom to compete in second markets. ESU would rather emphasise the essential role of higher education in order to fulfil the targets set in the European Pillar of Social Rights, and urge the European Commission, Parliament and its Council to focus on education as a social equaliser and a public good.

## **4. Democracy and transparency**

The work that the EU does must become more stakeholder-driven in the spirit of modern collegiality as outlined in ESU's policy paper on public responsibility, governance and financing of higher education. This means that educational initiatives and decisions should be developed with relevant stakeholders. It should be students, teachers and institutional representatives and their organisations that are consulted in education issues. It is important that the EU's internal structures create sustainable and representative stakeholder engagement structures to govern its educational initiatives.

ESU believes that large programmes that profoundly affect students, such as the Erasmus+ programme, should be co-governed by educational stakeholders. Not only for the sake of democracy, but to ensure the quality of the programmes. Educational stakeholders have a vested interest in creating the most responsible policies for those they represent. The European Union needs access to the information that stakeholder organisations have at their disposal.

The European Commission should choose its working groups according to democratic principles and relevant stakeholder expertise. There should be no preferential treatment of organisations whose opinions align themselves with those of the Commission. Policy should not be defined by the organisations that spend the most funds. The EU should engage with all stakeholders relevant to the issue under discussion.

The EU's structures are changing as they grow, and therefore it is vital to have an open dialogue with stakeholders and allow their input and criticism without their feeling threatened by a loss of funding or influence.

## **5. The use of research**

The EU should, in its every interaction with research support, encourage and welcome free, academic and rigorous research and policy debate. The EU and its different institutions must strive for a balanced comprehensive, and as impartial as possible use of studies, research and reports to reflect the multiple dimensions of policy-making and its effects. Only with academic freedom can research contribute to local communities and society at large. The potential for free and accessible research must always prevail over needs imposed by the market. Understanding the real challenges that societies face and constantly inspiring, and getting inspired by, the community it belongs to is a key function of research. Free, independent and meaningful research is a core value of democracy. Therefore, it is a public good and its results should belong to the society, making collectively supported research a communal good. The EU should always encourage a broad public discussion including different perspective and be clear about its own political goals and not pushing a hidden agenda. Especially as a large funder of research on higher education it is important that the EU appreciate the value of academic and rigorous research.

## **6. Involvement of The Council of Europe**

ESU acknowledges the crucial role that the Council of Europe plays in advocating for Human Rights and democratic citizenship, bringing forward the values of social inclusion. The cooperation between ESU and the Council of Europe is of fundamental importance, and should fruitfully continue, not only working together for inclusion and human rights but also enforcing the reality of a European cooperation that goes beyond the EU. The Council of Europe's approach to non-formal learning and European cooperation, among other elements, are in line with ESU's vision and core values. The approaches and visions shared with ESU include protection and promotion of Human Rights, working to ensure social rights and protecting national minorities, this in turn promotes quality education for all. Therefore, we



highly value the participation of the Council of Europe in multi-lateral agreements on higher education in Europe.

## **The Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area**

### **1. Introduction**

ESU acknowledges that the Bologna process has a great influence on higher education in Europe, as many European countries are reforming or have reformed their higher education systems in light of the Bologna declaration and following communiqués. However, we believe that we are still far from achieving a fully functioning European Higher Education Area.

The main challenges of the current process from the students' perspective have been: inconsistency or lack of implementation at the national level; pushing of national reforms under the pretext of the Bologna Process; poor follow-up on previous commitments and lack of independent reporting on its progress.

Nevertheless, ESU is committed to a European Higher Education Area that promotes and delivers high quality, accessible and student-centred education; social justice, participative equity, opportunities for mobility and serves as the foremost way to fix a broken social ladder; and autonomous and democratically led higher education institutions, which create critical thinkers and active citizens in democratic societies.

ESU recognises that these are all equally relevant and interlinked goals. Autonomy of the academic sector is a tool to protect the right to freedom of expression, diversity of methods and content of education and research. Therefore, autonomy must not be used as a way of putting universities in a competition based development. Democratic higher education institutions cannot exist without social justice and participative equity. Participative equity is a stimulating factor for high quality education because it is enrichment for the educational environment. By ensuring participation of a diverse student body in higher education decision-making process, a student centred approach can be fostered. Therefore, these goals are mutually reinforcing.

Thus, the European Higher Education Area must embed a quality culture whilst enshrining academic freedom; recognise that higher education is a human right, public good and public responsibility; work on the principle of cooperation, not competition; include students as co-creators and partners in the delivery and governance of the learning experience and recognise its own responsibility to society itself as a social good, and as such, be publicly funded.

### **2. From the Bologna Process to the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area**

Due to the nature of the Bologna process, the goals are often formulated in an abstract way in order to make it possible for every member state to agree to such a goal and for it to be acceptable in the national context. This created a problem for implementation on the ground, as the Bologna goals are rather disconnected from the reality at institutional and national level. ESU believes that such problems need to be addressed through the use of national actions plans that specify the action lines in more details for each national context. National-specific objectives should be clearly formulated, which will increase its relevance and state clearer goals for the institutions, teaching and institutional staff, students and other stakeholders.

Nonetheless, ESU warns that the Bologna Process' aims cannot be reached as long as member states are approaching the implementation in an "à la carte" manner. National governments shouldn't be able to handpick the reforms and action lines they want to work on and must make an effort to achieve more fundamental changes or address those areas that are of lower priority for governments. The action lines of the Bologna declaration and the subsequent communiqués are all interconnected and interdependent, so the reforms must be done in a comprehensive way. Countries need to make an express commitment to implement all the Bologna action lines equally. A fully functioning European Higher Education Area cannot be achieved without reaching minimum standards of commitment and integration.

ESU believes that there should be a control mechanism that would verify that governments and institutions are not misusing the name of the Bologna process to justify policies that are unrelated to the Bologna implementation. The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should find a way to ensure this.

Moreover, ESU believes that Bologna signatory countries should commit to implement commonly agreed pan-European benchmarks stated in the Bologna process action lines. The Bologna Process needs to be rebuilt on an approach based on targets for minimum expected standards of implementation. Ignoring minimum standards risks affecting the coherency of the European Higher Education Area. Therefore, there should be a clear differentiation between the process, as an inclusive process for developing new policies, cooperation and peer-learning, and the area itself, where only countries which have fulfilled the minimum standard should be members.

While the structure of higher education systems is being reformed, little is being done to make it understandable, clear and comprehensible to the wider public, especially prospective students. ESU thinks that it is crucial to enhance the communication and outreach of the European Higher Education Area, putting in place adequate and accessible transparency and information tools about the European Higher Education Area. Ministers should commit to establishing credible and easy to use guidance systems and to communicate what the academic opportunities in the European Higher Education Area are about to everyone. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) would be a suitable institution for providing if supported adequately. A true shift to a European area will not happen without these information support structures, rendering the European Higher Education Area as a myriad of systems that are incomparable while still carrying the same labels.

Students should also easily have access to information concerning universities, courses and student supports available in every country through the creation of a set of European guidelines on the description of study programmes.

### **3. Policy scope of the Bologna process**

While the structural reforms, for ensuring comparability and compatibility of the national systems of education, have been at the core of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area, ESU believes that the scope of the Bologna process needs to be expanded if the process is to remain relevant to all the signatory countries and ESU member unions. Therefore, ESU encourages more discussion on overarching issues such as social dimension, mobility, recognition, funding, e-learning, governance or research in the European Higher Education Area.

ESU acknowledges that different countries have joined the process at different times, and there are differences in the extent to which different member countries have implemented the action lines. While some countries are focusing on the implementation of the structural reforms, those who have already implemented them are willing to continue the further development of the cooperation within the European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that a two-speed process might be considered for the future of the Bologna Process and the sustainability of cooperation in the European Higher Education Area.



## **4. Structures and governance of the EHEA and the Bologna process**

More attention needs to be put on the governance of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area. The decisions on the steering of the process should be reserved for the Bologna ministerial meetings; however, ESU believes that the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should be given an even stronger voice during the entire process. The working groups should discuss the issues in-depth, prepare the background information and propose the issues to be discussed in the Bologna Follow-Up Group, while the visionary decisions are made at the ministerial conference.

Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to explore possibilities for a permanent Bologna/EHEA Secretariat that would be responsible for supporting other structures of the Bologna process and European Higher Education Area. ESU believes that the Bologna Secretariat should not be handed to any European institution, but should rather rely on the collective support of the Bologna participating countries and organisations.

ESU believes that a fund should be created to support the permanent structures and common projects and events on relevant topics, allowing a more diverse group of countries to participate and take the lead in the follow-up activities.

## **5. Stakeholders' involvement in developing and implementing the Bologna Process**

One of the distinctive features of the Bologna Process has been the involvement of stakeholders, especially of students, in the process since its really initial stages. ESU recognises that the stakeholders, through being consultative members of the process since its initial stages, have contributed significantly to the discussions and the developments of the different action lines. ESU stresses that trust, participation and ownership from the stakeholders has led to a better implementation of the reforms. A clear example is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, one of the most successful Bologna tools, which were developed by the E4 group (ESU, ENQA, EUA and EURASHE) and have also been revised by them in cooperation with the social stakeholders. It is of utmost importance that the path taken regarding student participation in the development and implementation of the Bologna Process should be continued and enhanced on all levels.

## **6. Follow-up and monitoring of the Bologna Process**

While the current implementation and progress reports have contributed to accelerating the reform by exposing the countries' evolution, ESU sees the need for an independent monitoring and reporting mechanism. Objective indicators, based on the above-mentioned student values of Bologna Process, should be developed. Together with improved data gathering and analysis, this would present the basis for further discussion and actions, however these indicators should not be used as a tool for incentive management of students or institutions.

Furthermore, ESU encourages the Bologna Follow-Up Group to develop the methodology to complement the current reports with better data gathering from different sources of information at the national level and not just ministerial officials. Additionally, the possibility of organising on-site visits by experts from other countries should be considered, which would allow for proper evaluation of the implementation of the Bologna reforms as well as the effect that they had on the higher education system of the country.

## **7. Bologna implementation on national level**

In order to achieve proper implementation on the national level, all member countries should establish (or continue) a structure with decision-making power that would include all stakeholders (akin the Bologna Follow-Up Group) and would be responsible for the implementation and follow-up of the reforms while respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. ESU is absolutely certain that consistent consultation and involvement of stakeholders at national levels is essential for a successful implementation of the Bologna reforms. Students, academic staff, institutional leadership and management as well as other stakeholders are the ones bearing the brunt of any change and thus should be part of any discussion and decision.

Governments need to establish special incentives and provide a significant level of financial and regulatory support for institutions that are trying to implement various elements of the Bologna process. There should be a system of scrutiny for the implementation of Bologna while focusing on improvement rather than penalisation. There should be tools developed for encouraging institutions to implement the Bologna process effectively.

## **8. Bologna in the global dimension**

EHEA is facing a continuing economic and social crisis, unemployment, increasing marginalisation of certain groups, demographic changes, obstacles to freedom of movement as well as conflicts within and between countries, resulting in oppression and injustice as well as violation of human rights. On the other hand, greater mobility of students and staff, not only in Europe but also beyond, fosters mutual understanding and pursuing common EHEA goals. While other regions do and can contribute to further EHEA development through their own policy and practice experience, the original vision and structure of the cooperation have to be revised.

ESU believes that the cooperation and policy dialogue between the EHEA and regional higher education networks and cooperation's beyond Europe need to be continued and strengthened. It is important that this is done by taking into account that the diverse higher education as well as political, economic and cultural systems of different regions and countries require applying diverse tools, including pilot projects and peer learning activities between the Bologna Policy Fora. All the initiatives must involve all stakeholders, especially students from all the regions represented. For the benefit of all, the discussion must not be Europe driven, but by applying the experience- and learning-oriented approach should allow for information exchange that will lead to mutual understanding and cooperation.